

NGONI CULTURE

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In the 1930's, in the villages of the *alumuzana*, individuals with the same clan name formed patrilineal groups of an extended family type. The original *alumuzana* were the leaders of groups of persons bearing their clan descent name, who crossed the Zambesi under Zwangendaba or Mputa. In Part II we shall see how these *alumuzana* were settled in the Ngoni kingdoms round the royal villages, with the result that a group of villages of mixed ethnic origin came to be associated with the village regarded as the head village of a clan. Reference is made from time to time in this study to clan heads, and to the head villages of certain clans. There was no head of a Swazi or trans-Zambesi clan who was not regarded as a *mulumuzana*. On the ground that his ancestor crossed the Zambesi with his wives and followers, the head of such a clan was always given that title. In addition to the head village of a *mulumuzana* there were a number of other villages connected with the clan, created partly by the working of the *luxungulu* system of village segmentation, and partly by other sections of the larger villages moving off to make new gardens. The association of a number of villages owned by individuals with the same descent name was due to the original settlement of the *alumuzana* who were given land at varying distances from the royal village. When the Ngoni spoke of 'clan areas' this was the connotation they gave to the term. Village censuses showed that small family groups bearing the same descent name were scattered widely over a number of villages in several of the chiefs' areas. There was, however, in connexion with each clan an area of concentration round the head village where a number of families and individuals with that descent name were living. These were sometimes referred to as clan areas, using the name of the clan with the prefix *ma*, meaning the people of that clan, in central Nguniland, and with the prefix *u*, meaning the land of the clan, in the northern kingdom.

(c) *The ritual patterns*

In the rest of this study there will be descriptions and analyses of Ngoni marriage and funeral rites, of the puberty rites carried out for each boy and girl, but not in groups in initiation schools, and of the rituals associated with the ownership of cattle and with the ancestor cult. The marriage and funeral rites have South-eastern Bantu affinities, and so has the ritual associated with cattle-keeping and the ancestor cult. The northern Ngoni had a tradition that circumcision was practised among them when they left Natal, and that it was given up while they were in Tanganyika. Giving the head-ring (*cidlodlo*) to the men who were allowed to leave the regiments and settle as married men in civilian life was another ritual of southern origin which the Ngoni gave up soon after the kingdoms were established in Nyasaland.¹ The

¹ The early Europeans in Nyasaland reported that head-rings were worn by all the senior Ngoni men.

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Father's family to child

Ngoni children were indeed the children of their fathers from the time of their birth onwards. They were born into a 'house', of which their father was a member. If their father divorced his wife or she ran away, the children remained in the custody of his family. We have seen how the paternal grandmother took charge of all the preparations for birth, and of the actual birth itself. It was her proud duty to present the child to the public after the 'coming out of the hut' ceremony, when she took it to the kraal gate where the assembled elders were sitting. The other senior women of Ngoni families held her responsible for advising on the spacing between the birth of this new baby and the next, so that the interests of this child should be safeguarded. If it was suspected that the young wife was pregnant again before the grandmother had planned to wean the child, the other senior women said to her: 'Look now. You are foolish. The child has been endangered. You are like an enemy to him.' That touched her on a very vital point, and she in turn accused the young parents of harming the present child. Having rebuked them, generally in public, she followed it up with a box on the ear for her son and his wife. When this next child was born it was called 'the destroyer', because by following on too quickly, it had injured the prospects of the first child.

Baby to nurse girl and women helpers

The baby, as we have seen, spent a great deal of its time in the company of its nurse girl, and after weaning she was its constant companion. She and the older woman helpers who supervised her formed a counterbalancing influence to the paternal grandmother, though outwardly they obeyed her instructions about the care of the child. The nurse girl especially was inclined to be indulgent; she was young and playful; the baby was her only responsibility. She was

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- 854 anxious to protect her charge in every way, and with the connivance of the women helpers she made little charms of bits of roots to hang around the baby's neck to make him grow quickly and to ward off sorcery and witchcraft. She threaded pumpkin seeds and tied them around his neck to make his teeth come quickly if they were late in appearing. These charms were generally those used by the local peoples, and Ngoni fathers were contemptuous about their use and efficacy. 'These women are spoiling our children,' they said, and then reassured themselves by remembering that a boy would be free from such women's spoiling once he went into the boys' dormitory.

Variants on the Ngoni pattern

- 83 This traditional pattern of authority and behaviour in respect of birth, infant care and weaning was essentially that of the true Ngoni, that relatively small aristocratic group who never forgot their superior social status and its foundation in their ancestry. This first stage in the socialization of a child, from birth to weaning, brought out clearly two fundamental features of Ngoni social organization. One was the role played by the senior women who had themselves in their childhood been brought up on strict Ngoni lines. The father of the new baby accepted the role played by his own mother in controlling, and if necessary coercing, his young wife. Though, as we shall see later, every Ngoni boy and young man had a period of virtually complete escape from feminine control, once a man married and his young wife was established within the social group of his mother's house, he acknowledged his mother's authority over her, and particularly over the birth and care of his child. The mother-son relationship of the young father to his own mother dominated the relationship of the young mother to her child. Young Ngoni fathers never questioned their allegiance to their own mothers, cherishing them as they grew older and supporting them in their exercise of authority. Much as he loved his

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young wife, an Ngoni husband would not normally support her against his own mother. In the case of his child, who was born a member of his family, house and clan, his mother and her circle of senior women had uncontested sway. 596 867

The second features of Ngoni social organization which the 'arrival of a new stranger' demonstrated was the women's interest in and capacity for planning and organization. The senior women had no doubt about what steps to take and who should take them, from the time when labour began till after weaning. The preparations for the birth, the receiving of the child, the care of mother and baby after birth, the ritual cleansing of the hut, the presentation of the child to the public—all these acts up to and including weaning were planned with what seemed an elaborate organization when first observed, but which turned out to be standard Ngoni practice. Two particular aspects of this organization stood out as different from the local practices: the provision for artificial feeding of the child, and the role played by nurse girls and women helpers. 183 596 [184]

The main variants in this pattern arose from three causes: the effect of marriage with women of other ethnic groups who married into Ngoni families and had to accept the pattern of authority imposed by the house organization of Ngoni women. They therefore had to follow in its main lines the procedures we have described for the birth and care of infants. But Ngoni men and women deplored in particular two non-Ngoni elements which were creeping into the conduct of birth and post-natal ceremonies. One was the attitude taken during difficult labour when the women attending to the mother tried to force her to confess to illicit sexual relations which the non-Ngoni believed to be the cause of the delayed birth. The other was the prohibition on a wife putting salt in the food she was cooking while she was menstruating or at any other ritually unclean period. The true Ngoni despised this salt taboo and the women of Ngoni families did not practise it. 177 563 [845] [841]